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Lambda Letters Project

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6212 Silverton Way, Carmichael, California 95608

Phone (916) 965-6851

Issue for All Members

Women's Issue

Lessons from the School of Hard Knocks

The lesbian, gay, and bisexual community suffered three significant setbacks in Congress in the past several weeks, and is likely to suffer at least three additional losses at the state level during September. This article considers what lessons we can learn from these events.

In mid-July the U.S. Senate passed, by 92 to 8, an amendment to the Agricultural Appropriations bill which forbade the U.S. Department of Agriculture from seeking gay, lesbian, or bisexual employees or from supporting gay-positive programs. Our California Senators, both Democrats, split on this issue. Senator Feinstein supported it while Senator Boxer opposed it.

On August 1 the Senate voted 63 to 36 in favor of an amendment to the Improving America's Schools Act, S. 1513, prohibiting local school districts from using funds appropriated by the act for any gay-positive programs, such as Project 10 in Los Angeles. The amendment passed but both California Senators Feinstein and Boxer voted against it.

Continued on page 5

Also in This Issue:

Lambda Letters Scoreboard	2
Same-Sex Marriages Supported by JACL	3
Gay-Friendly Schools Threatened by Helms	3
LLP Letter-Writing Position Available	4
Domestic Partnerships Needed	4
Call and Write the Governor!	6
Combatting Hate Violence Locally	7

Congress Passes the Violence Against Women Act

Passage of the omnibus crime bill this year resulted in some wins and some losses.

In mid-August Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act, after incorporating it in the omnibus crime bill, H.R. 3355. The bill was sent to the President who promised to sign it. The bill allows the victims of felonies that are motivated by gender to bring civil suits against their assailants. It also allows immigrant spouses of U.S. citizens to petition for legal resident status on behalf of themselves and their children if they are the victims of spousal abuse. This reduces the opportunity of husbands to threaten to have them deported if they report the abuse. The bill also provides \$1.6 billion to train judges and police regarding domestic abuse, domestic violence prevention programs in schools, etc.

The larger crime bill also creates a long list of federal crimes punishable by death. This feature was opposed by the Congressional Black Caucus. They also failed in their attempt to have the law allow defendants to appeal death sentences by using statistics to show that the death penalty is applied in a discriminatory manner.

Lambda Letters Progress Report

Letters Collected

July	2,012 letters
This year	17,297 letters

Dollars Spent

July	\$ 832
This year	\$8,214

Please support the very important work of the Lambda Letters Project with your contributions!

Lambda Letters Project

Statement of Purpose

To promote people of color, feminist, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and AIDS/HIV+ status advocacy and to bring people of color, women, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and persons affected by or living with AIDS/HIV+ status into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof.

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Lambda Letters Scoreboard

Here is an update on legislation that our members have written on in the past few months:

State Bills

A.B. 2610 (Author, Vivian Bronshvag-D): Allows counties to establish clean needle and syringe distribution programs. Lambda Letters supports A.B. 2610. As of the date of this writing, the bill has passed the Assembly and the Senate. It is now on its way to the Governor.

A.B. 2810 (Author, Richard Katz-D): Allows statewide registration of domestic partners. Lambda Letters supports A.B. 2810. Passed the legislature; now awaiting the Governor's signature.

A.B. 3374 (Author, Johan Klehs-D): Increases penalties on sweat shop owners and places of employment that violate labor laws. Lambda Letters supports A.B. 3374. Has been sent to the Governor for his signature.

S.B. 1350 (Author, Diane Watson-D): Reduces the difficulties faced by a single parent who needs to relocate for a new job or to continue her education. Lambda Letters supports S.B. 1350. The bill has not been approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee; it will die at the end of this session and will have to be reintroduced next year.

S.B. 1528 (Author, Cathie Wright-R): Removes from current law the presumption that parents with custody of a child may determine the place of residence of their child. Lambda Letters opposes S.B. 1528. Has not been approved by the Senate Judiciary Committee and will die at the end of this session.

S.B. 2057 (Author, Diane Watson-D): In its original form, would have provided funds for the State Department of Justice to compile records of hate crimes in California. Lambda Letters supported the bill in this form. However, funding for tracking hate crimes was removed from the bill. It was approved by both houses of the legislature and sent to the Governor for signature.

S.B. 2061 (Author, Gary Hart-D): Would allow members of the Public Employees Retirement System (state and local government employees) to enroll their domestic partners on their employer provided health insurance plan. Lambda Letters supports S.B. 2061. Passed the Senate and the Assembly. As of this writing, it has been returned to the Senate for concurrence on amendments made in the Assembly. Is expected to go to the Governor.

Federal Bills

Violence Against Women Act: Passed by both houses of Congress as part of the major crime bill. See the related article for details on this bill, which now goes to the President for signature. Lambda Letters supports the Violence Against Women Act but takes no position on the larger crime bill.

H.R. 4148 (Author, Martin Meehan-D): Gay and Lesbian Youth Suicide Prevention Act. Would create a commission to study and recommend responses to suicide among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. Has 30 House cosponsors. Has been in the Subcommittee on Health and the Environment of the House Energy and Commerce Committee since April 26, 1994. Is unlikely to pass Congress this year. Would have to be reintroduced next year.

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JACL Supports Same-Sex Marriages

On August 6th the National Convention of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) voted to support its National Board's policy statement approving the concept of same-sex marriages. Delegates to the convention defeated a resolution condemning the Board's policy statement. The resolution failed with 50 delegates voting against it, 38 for it, 4 split votes and 11 abstaining. The JACL is now one of the few national organizations to support the concept of same-sex marriages.

The vote was preceded by a lengthy and impassioned debate. Supporters of the policy statement included Congressmember Norman Mineta (D-San Jose) who reviewed the history of the struggle for redress of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. He particularly noted the public support given to the JACL by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. He also recalled that openly gay Congressmember Barney Frank (D-MA) made redress his top priority when he became chair of the House Administrative Law Committee in 1987. The convention also received letters of support on this issue from the Asian Law Caucus, the Japanese American Bar Association, and the National Asian Pacific Lesbian and Bisexual Women's Network. All of this is clearly an example of different communities forming alliances for their mutual benefit.

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Deadline is the 25th of each month.

Gay-Friendly Schools Threatened

This month's lay/lesbian/bisexual letter concerns the Smith/Helms amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—major funding to all public schools. The amendment reads that schools which "carry out a program or activity that has either the purpose or the effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive alternative lifestyle" be cutoff from federal financial support! This means that under the Smith/Helms amendment, districts serving students with support groups, counseling, gay-inclusive AIDS-prevention education, balanced sex-education curriculum, and community referrals for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth would be punished by the withholding of federal funds.

The bill was meant to keep us on the defensive. The initial Senate vote to adopt this language was 63 in favor to 36 opposed. Senator Kennedy has offered a counter-amendment that would cancel out the effect of Smith/Helms, which would include prohibition of encouragement of any sexual activity, heterosexual or homosexual. The bill is expected to be fought out in a joint House/Senate committee early this September, so send in your letters quickly!

California Senators Boxer and Feinstein voted against Smith/Helms, so some of our letters are letters of thanks to them, and an entreaty to lobby hard for the amendment's defeat. The rest of our letters are to our Representatives to ask for deletion of the Smith/Helms language, and subsequent defeat in committee.

If you are an educator, please use a copy of this letter or adapt your own and take in to your colleagues, teachers, administrators, school board members, school counselors, concerned parents, and others to encourage the educational community to speak out against this deliberate, destructive amendment.



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Letter and Article Composer Needed

Sharlene Gilman has done an excellent job over the past year researching our gay/lesbian/bisexual subject each month and composing the monthly sample letters and articles on that subject. However, she has had to withdraw because of outside responsibilities. We need to find a replacement for this important volunteer position.

We need someone in the Sacramento area with good writing skills who will spend about 10 hours per month researching possible subjects and composing sample letters and articles for our newsletter. He or she would also attend a weekday evening, staff meeting each month in which each month's subjects are chosen. The project can provide leads on how to find suitable subjects and advice on writing if needed. This is a great opportunity for you to influence the subjects we cover.

Interested? Please enclose a note with your letters, or call us at 965-6851.

Domestic Partnership Recognition Needed

Assemblymember Richard Katz has authored the Domestic Partnership Bill, A.B. 2810. This is seen not only as a gay/lesbian/bisexual issue and an elderly issue, but also as a very important *woman's issue*. Due to the economic disadvantage women experience because of a male-dominated culture, women need to be protected financially in as many ways as possible.

The life expectancy of women is greater than that of males. Many women will outlive their husbands and face economic hardship at the loss of their spouses' pension if they remarry. By law, if a woman remarries, she automatically loses her deceased husband's pension benefits. However, if she enters into a domestic partnership, she will still have rights to his pension.

This domestic partnership bill is critical to ensure financial security for women. Write letters of support now for A.B. 2810! Make it clear that this not only affects gays, lesbians, and bisexuals and the elderly, but women as well.

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School of Hard Knocks

Continued from page 1

A companion bill passed by the House of Representatives earlier this year, (H.R. 6) contains a similar anti-gay provision. The two bills will now go to a Senate/House Conference Committee to iron out the differences between them. But since both bills prohibit giving funds to school districts with gay-positive programs, the compromise bill is likely to contain that same or similar language.

On the state level, the state legislature will probably pass a statewide domestic partner registration bill, a domestic partner health benefits bill for government employees, and a clean needle distribution bill. However, the Governor is likely to veto all three and we probably do not have enough votes in the legislature to overturn his vetoes. (By the way, it is important to voice our support for these bills anyway. Controversial bills like these rarely pass the first time; but our support now increases the chance these bills will become law the next time.)

So what are the lessons from all this?

Lesson number one: Most politicians still see the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community as a tiny, socially outcast community that can be thwarted with little fear of retribution at the ballot box. We are, after all, no more than 10 percent of the total population.

Lesson number two: We must wring more effort from a higher percentage of our small community by getting more of us involved. Lambda Letters could greatly increase the number of its members and the number of letters collected each month. But our current monthly income is too low to afford more than small increases in our membership. Many of you have been very generous in your contributions, but the hard fact is that

we need much more income to finance the necessary growth in our activities. Please give serious consideration to making generous and repeated contributions and/or to purchasing an Entertainment Book to support our work. Please also consider helping us sell the books in your area.

Lesson number three: We need alliances with the lobbying organizations of other minority communities. If the politicians see blacks, Latinos/Latinas, Asian Pacific Islanders and others lobbying on lesbian/gay/bisexual issues alongside us, they will be more wary of opposing gay rights because they could risk losing more votes at election time.

However, the leaders of other communities risk losing support in their own communities when they support our issues. After all, gays are still social outcasts to much of the world. There will always be a Jesse Helms ready to attack them for supporting sexual minorities. We need to give serious consideration to what we must do to make it worth their while taking the risk.

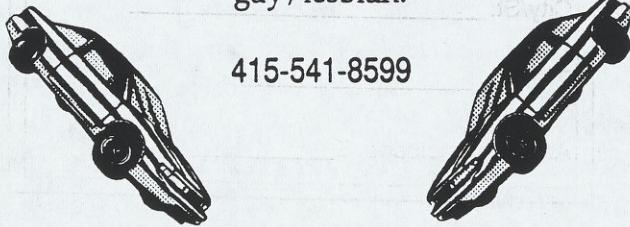
Lesson number four: Never give up. The gay rights bill has well over 100 cosponsors in the U.S. House of Representatives and over 30 in the Senate. Seven states now ban discrimination based on sexual orientation and Vermont provides health benefits to the domestic partners of state employees. Governor Cuomo (D-NY) has offered to provide domestic partner health benefits to his state's employees. More and more courts are ruling against the government's policy against including gays in the military. Progress is being made, but we are going to have to work hard and contribute generously to the organizations that represent us. If we all dedicate ourselves to the task in these ways we shall overcome.

Please do what you can to support Lambda Letters with your time and money.

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Please order your book today!

Ring the Governor's Phone Off the Hook!

You can call Governor Wilson's office at any time to register an opinion on A.B. 2810 (Domestic Partners). It is done via an automated response system; you just push buttons to register your opinion. The bad part is that to get to the section devoted to A.B. 2810 you must first listen to a host of other issues (taking up 2:15 of your phone time). When you call, press 2 to register an opinion on current bills; the option for A.B. 2810 then comes after seven other bills/issues. You then select the bill and register a support vote. Since you can imagine that the homophobic Other Side will be voting multiple times on this, you should consider doing so as well.

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Issue for All

Time to Bombard the Governor with Letters!

There are three bills currently awaiting Governor Wilson's signature, each one of which Lambda Letters has composed letters for the Governor to read. Rather than send out a copy of the sample letters for each member to sign, Lambda Letters decided to divide the three letters (one concerning each bill) among all the members, so each of you would have only one letter to the Governor to sign.

Since Governor Wilson has until the end of September to act on any one of these bills, you are urged to return the signed letter ASAP. You may also wish to call him at 916-445-2864 (or fax his office at 916-445-4633) to register your opinion concerning these bills. Below are details of our three letters so that all members can know on what we are writing.

We support S.B. 2610, the Clean Needle and Syringe Exchange Program. This bill has reached the Governor's desk twice before, only to be vetoed both times. Our letter says, in part, that injection drug users are the second largest group at risk of becoming infected with HIV, and are the primary source of heterosexual, female, and prenatal transmission in California.

The lack of sterile needles on the streets promotes needle sharing—and the spread of the virus from already-HIV+ drug users to their non-drug-using sexual partners and children *in utero*. According to the National Commission on AIDS, "fears that needle and syringe exchange and distribution programs might

Continued on page 7

LLP Volunteer Classifieds

Letter Composer Needed—Someone from the Sacramento area needed to help select each month's lesbian/gay/bisexual topic. Will compose each month's L/G/B sample letter and newsletter article. Will attend one meeting a month. We provide leads to help find topics and guidance in composing letters and articles.

Entertainment Booksellers Needed—People from any part of the state are needed to help sell Entertainment Books. Sellers get a free book for every 11 sold. Book sales are vital to the support of Lambda Letters. Please help!

Persons interested in any of the above may send us their name, address, and phone number, or may call us at (916) 965-6851.

Combatting Hate Violence Locally

Times of economic downturn bring with them noticeable increases in unemployment and homelessness. But what goes largely undetected during tough economic times is the significant rise in "hate violence"—acts of intimidation, harassment, or assault motivated by hatred toward a person because of their ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, or disability.

The level of hate violence in California and in the rest of the nation has reached epidemic proportions. The available data on hate violence shows not only a rise in the overall number of incidents, but also increasingly diverse victims, and more severe violence. In addition to economic circumstances, this trend has been exacerbated by media portrayals of negative stereotypes and by irresponsible politicians who fail to take leadership roles in combatting hate.

Because the state government has largely ignored the problem of hate violence, the burden of addressing it falls largely on the shoulders of local government. And without state guidance, there has been no effort on the part of local governments to establish and implement a standardized approach to the problem.

A.B. 2765, authored by Assemblywoman Barbara Lee, would begin to solve that problem by providing for the development of a model hate-violence prevention program for use by local governments throughout California. While the bill does not provide a funding source for the model program, it does establish a framework for its development and statewide application with the use of private funds.

The model program would be based on Alameda County's very successful "Hate Violence Task Force" which incorporates victim assistance, an information network, training and prevention programs, a reporting system and a crisis response team, among other things.

A.B. 2765 has passed the Legislature and awaits the Governor's action. It is important that he sign this bill into law. In the absence of an effective response to hate violence at the state level, local governments must be given the tools to address this growing problem.

Writing the Governor

Continued from page 6

encourage drug use and a new class of drug injectors have not materialized."

Needle exchange is supported by most of the major public health groups in this state, including the California Medical Association, the California Nurses Association, and numerous HIV service and drug-treatment organizations across the state. Because it is a local option bill, only those communities with significant local support would be able to apply for authorization from the Department of Health Services.

We support S.B. 38 concerning Medigap issues. Our letter says, in part, that this bill would prohibit health plans and insurers from denying Medicare supplemental policies (Medigap policies) to the disabled. Currently insurers cannot deny this coverage to those who are on Medicare and also over age 65 (although they may deny it to disabled persons under age 65). This younger, disabled population comprises only 1.3 percent of the total Medicare population in California. The bill does not require insurers to offer comprehensive benefits. Thus its effect on insurance firms will not be significant. In addition, the bill's effect may be to shift some patient costs from Medi-Cal to private Medigap policies, resulting in savings to the State. The bill's provisions are sound medical and fiscal policy.

We oppose S.B. 1239 regarding HIV testing and exposure notification on the following grounds. This bill would permit mandatory testing of a patient's blood in the case of a potential occupational exposure at the request of a health care worker or "first responder." S.B. 1239 is both unnecessary and represents a dangerous precedent for mandatory HIV testing in California. It does nothing to reduce the risk of HIV infection to health care workers or first responders. Only following universal precautions for infection control, which are already mandated, will reduce exposure risk. State law already provides health care workers who are involved in the diagnosis and treatment of a patient access to all HIV-related information in that patient's medical record. S.B. 1239 contains loopholes which would allow substantially broader testing of patients than is represented by its sponsors, permit violations of confidentiality, and provide expanded access to patients' medical records.

In addition to signing and returning your letters promptly this month, *please try to call or fax the Governor's office as well.*

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